

Lost Marsden Hartley painting located in Portland bank vault

An art scholar tracked down the Lewiston native's work, which hasn't been displayed in over 40 years.

By **BOB KEYES**
Staff Writer

For years, scholars wondered about the whereabouts of a painting from 1936 by modernist and Maine native Marsden Hartley. They knew the painting

existed, because a black-and-white photo of it was reproduced in a catalog from a Hartley exhibition in Nova Scotia in 1987. The painting itself, an elegy for Canadian friends who drowned in an Atlantic hurricane, was not

in the exhibition, but was described in the catalog as belonging to a collector from Maine. Prior to that, it had been exhibited only twice, in New York at American Place Gallery soon after its creation in 1936 and in Portland in 1980 at Barridoff Galleries, where it was later sold

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Gail Scott said "Friend Against the Wind", 1936, is a memorial to a friend of Marsden Hartley, a theme he started in 1914.

Courtesy of Marsden Hartley Legacy Project

HARTLEY

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into a private collection.

The painting resurfaced this summer in a Key Bank vault in downtown Portland, where an art collector had taken it many years ago for safekeeping out of fear of it being stolen from his Windham home. The collector had recently died, and his lawyer contacted Portland art historian Gail Scott, who is working with the Bates College Museum of Art to create a comprehensive online catalog of all known Hartley paintings and works on paper, the Marsden Hartley Legacy Project.

'THE PAINTER OF MAINE'

Nearly all other major artists of Hartley's stature have had their work fully chronicled, with each painting or work on paper documented with date of creation, exhibition, ownership and other vital details, and often commentary as well. But that had not happened for Hartley, until Bates took it on when it received nearly \$200,000 from the Horowitz Foundation for the Arts to start the project. The museum recently received a \$100,000 grant from the New York-based Vilecek Foundation to finish it.

"Hartley is increasingly recognized as one of the most significant American modernists of the 20th century," said museum director Dan Mills. "He is also one of the few of his generation and stature who does not have this kind of comprehensive scholarship available. It's a huge project, and we are so fortunate to have one of the preeminent Hartley scholars living in Maine and already deeply committed to Hartley and Hartley scholarship."

Hartley was a Lewiston native, born in 1877, and the Bates museum is home to the Hartley Memorial Collection, given by the artist's heirs and including the largest grouping of Hartley drawings, as well as the artist's palette, brushes, easel and other contents from his final home and studio in Corea on the Down East coast, sketchbooks and early oil paintings. Over the years, Bates has acquired other Hartley paintings to add to its holdings. He died in Ells-



Courtesy photo

Portland art historian Gail Scott is leading a project to catalog all Marsden Hartley art work for the Bates College Museum of Art. Scott said before going into the bank vault back in August, she'd only ever seen "Friend Against the Wind" in black and white.

worth in 1943, after traveling the world widely as an itinerant painter, and always considered himself "the painter of Maine."

Scott, who lives in Portland and has dedicated much of her career to Hartley scholarship, called the discovery of the 1936 painting "a eureka moment" in her research because it represented something new. Certainly, the collector, whose family asked Scott not to name him, knew what he had and cared enough about the painting to protect it by putting it in a bank vault – and bequeathing it to a major New England art museum, which Scott would not name, where it will reside in the future. But it was a moment of discovery for Scott and other Hartley scholars, who had only heard about but never seen this work. It had not been displayed publicly in more than 40 years, went into a private collection – and then into a vault.

As part of her research with the legacy project, Scott had tried to contact the collector himself, by phone and letter, but never got a response. She chalked it up as a failed attempt to find the painting or its owner, and categorized the painting's whereabouts as unknown. It might still have been in the private collection, could have been passed on as a gift or sold – or, as its owner had feared might happen, stolen in a robbery. But then in late spring or

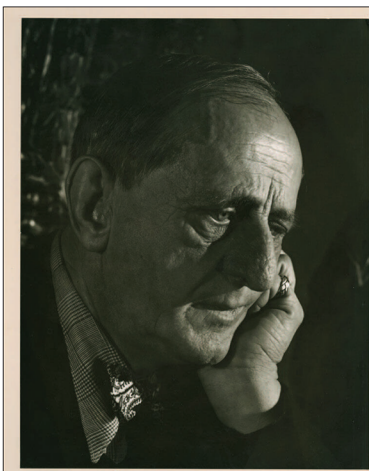
early summer, Scott heard from the estate attorney, who told her that her letter inquiring about the painting had indeed been received – three days after the collector died. In her grief, the collector's widow passed the letter on to the attorney.

In August, Scott finally got to see the painting in person in the bank vault.

"It took a couple of months, but sure enough, I walked down to the Key Bank in downtown Portland and into the big vault and there was this painting that I had never seen in color and had never seen in person," she said. She photographed the painting front and back, and spent time absorbing, noting and documenting details.

It is among Hartley's many memorials to deceased friends, a theme he began with his German Officer paintings in 1914, Scott said. She described it "a stylized, symbolic work." The oil-on-board painting, 17 inches tall and 12 inches wide, features a gold chalice with a red heart and cross, with two cloud-like forms, or white roses.

As she examined the back of the painting, she saw that it had many names over the years. One of its several alternate titles, in French, was "Ciboire avec Oserie," or "Chalice with Host," suggesting the Eucharist, she said. It had also been known as "Friend in the Storm" and, most recently, as "Roses for Fishermen Lost at



Alfredo Valente

A 1942 portrait of Marsden Hartley. He died a year later in Ellsworth.

Sea." But Hartley named the painting "Friend Against the Wind," based on his own inscription on the back, and that is the name Scott is using in her research.

'THE HUNT IS ONGOING'

The painting's discovery and Scott's ability to place it in the context of Hartley's career is why this research is so vital, said William Low, the Bates museum curator. "The hunt is ongoing. There is still a lot of flogging to do, but there are moments of revelation that are exciting for her," Low said. "That is what she lives for."

The Vilecek Foundation grant will allow Scott to do more research to try to account for more of those missing Hartley works, Low said. "The grant that we had for the project from the Horowitz Foundation was very generous and a good kickstart to a very important project. This grant puts us in a position to get to the finish line. Gail has been working feverishly to identify works and communicate with collectors and institutions," Low said.

Founded by art lovers and Hartley fans Jan and Marica Vilecek, the New York foundation supports arts and science projects, and collaborated with Bates on its "Marsden Hartley: Adventurer in the Arts" exhibition this year at the

museum. Mills praised the Vilecek Foundation for supporting the museum and its research. "They are so deeply committed to Hartley and American modernist art, and we are pleased and gratified to be in partnership with them," he said.

Until Scott's research, modern Hartley experts knew little about the 1936 painting other than what they gleaned from the black-and-white photo, which was limited. They feared it had disappeared, and counted it among approximately 240 paintings or works on paper by Hartley unaccounted for among the 1,650 or so that he created over a 40-plus year career.

Some might be hidden in dusty attics, others stored in banks. Most likely, many of those missing works were early paintings or drawings that are truly lost and not merely unaccounted for. "We are certain of that," Scott said.

Among those likely lost is a painting of a cigar store next to Hartley's studio on Lisbon Street in Lewiston from 1902 or 1903, which is described in correspondence in the Hartley collection at Bates. "We have never seen anything resembling that kind of storefront or that view of Lisbon Street," Scott said. "But there is a lot of research to be done."

WHAT SHOULD BE KNOWN

On the Marsden Hartley Legacy Project website, collectors are invited to submit work for Scott to examine. The hope is to encourage people who might be holding some of those unaccounted works to come forward.

"Many of the submissions so far have not been works by Hartley, but there are several examples of people who heard about our project and submitted something (original by Hartley)," she said.

One was a Hartley watercolor submitted by an appraiser from an estate in the Midwest. "In fact, it was one of those lost paintings, what I call one of the 'whereabouts unknown' works by Hartley. She was appraising an estate of a woman who had owned it and contacted us."

It was another eureka moment, with more to come.

The project currently has one-part time staff person, an art history graduate student from Columbia University who is helping to procure images and manage a social media campaign. Scott said the Vilecek Foundation grant will allow her to hire another researcher to help explore and document the ownership of artworks.

"The research continues into the ownership history of 1,600-plus works by Hartley, and finding current owners as well as past ownership," she said. "That is what I am hoping to do with the Vilecek support, to hire another likely art-history graduate student or someone with experience in this kind of research. That would be a great help to me."

With someone else on board, Scott would be free to do the art-history sleuthing work that inspires her and is vital to the project's success.

"We are an educational institution, and our focus is on supporting the scholarship so the things that should be known will be known," said Mills, the museum director. "Gail is discovering works that have been out of view for a long time and making scholarly discoveries by focusing on this work and that work and connecting the dots among those works, as only this kind of hands-on scholarship can do."

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